



STATE OF WASHINGTON  
CONSERVATION COMMISSION

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VIA FACSIMILE  
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May 24, 2006

Governor Chris Gregoire  
Office of the Governor  
P.O. Box 40002  
Olympia, WA 98504-0002

RE: Sustainable Agriculture and Resource Conservation

Dear Governor Gregoire:

We are writing to introduce the issues we wish to discuss with you this Friday, May 26, 2006. As your representatives on the Washington State Conservation Commission, we would like to introduce ourselves first. I have the honor of occupying Vim Wright's seat on the Conservation Commission, representing the state-wide environmental community, specifically Washington Environmental Council and Farming and the Environment. Jim Peters, of the Squaxin Island Tribe, is serving his second term on the Commission, representing the tribes' perspective.

Although the Conservation Commission includes over 455 people working to bring conservation to private lands, we are a well-kept secret. Jim and I are part of a small, largely invisible, army of dedicated conservationists who make environmental improvements to the lands of our state every day.

Of the 455 conservationists, 240 are volunteer Supervisors and Commissioners, serving the states agricultural and forestry communities as a labor of love. Through voluntary, incentive-based practices, the conservation districts (CD's) and private landowners are steadily, and for the most part silently, improving our state's soil, water, and air while increasing productivity of working lands and making small farming and small forestry more sustainable. The CD's constitute a remarkably effective, nearly invisible, statewide network of active conservationists who see environmental protection as simply the right thing to do. And they are getting it done, often for pennies on the dollar, reflecting a rural, working-lands culture of frugality and pragmatism.

Despite the success of the Commission and the CD's, or perhaps because of it, we face these challenges:

1. Consistent, Adequate Funding: There are literally thousands of willing landowners who are not able to save water, soil, or riparian areas on their land because the conservation districts are stretched too thin. A number of skilled technicians are being forced to leave their district offices this summer due to lack of continued funding. For example, the Whatcom County CD is losing a nutrient technician this summer, just when technical assistance is most needed, as well as losing a public education specialist, because there is no funding available. In Kittitas County, as another example, the district has a backlog of work it is unable to do for landowners who have water they would like to put in trust for the state, but who need help installing water-saving irrigation practices. The state's NRCS office has a backlog of 6,000 landowners waiting for assistance in making voluntary improvements on their lands.

Two funding sources to consider are the purchase of agriculture and forestry easements and the use of conservation tax credits. Florida's new Rural and Family Lands Protection Act aims to protect one acre of agricultural land for every acre lost, in part by purchasing conservation easements. An example of the use of conservation tax credits is the Georgia Land Conservation Tax Credit legislation that passed unanimously on March 1, 2006.

2. Education: Since our staff and volunteers are overworked (as well as underpaid), they have very little time for public education. They need time for educating future farmers, ranchers, and foresters, as well as the general public. They need time to explore innovative means of improving agriculture and forestry with students and their larger communities. Education is the key to voluntary compliance, which is, in turn, the best solution to non-point source pollution. The CDs have the information and know-how, but do not now have sufficient time for essential educational outreach.
3. Urban Interface: The CDs face accelerating challenges from small landowners with a few animals ("hobby farms"). The Snohomish CD, for example, is getting about 200 new requests per year for assistance from small landowners. Unless these landowners can be educated and assisted with practices that protect their lands--and the public resources that are affected by them--non-point source pollution will continue to increase.
4. Global Competition: Our farmers, livestock producers, and foresters are competing on a global stage where they are economically handicapped by our environmental and other governmental regulations. To even the playing field, as a state, we need to compensate these producers for their contribution to safe and healthful local food, fiber, and fuel.

5. Hinterland Development: Historically when urban areas have lost their agricultural hinterlands, they have collapsed. As a state we need to foster local production of year-round crops for local consumption. This is a matter not only of food security, but also of health and the survival of small farms and small forestry operations. This concept has been implemented in British Columbia's Agricultural Land Reserve, described in the news clipping attached.

Direct marketing is growing steadily, with 3,900 farmers' markets nationwide. The USDA's Farmers Markets Promotion Program could possibly be enhanced by a specific Washington State program to encourage profitable local markets.

6. Land Use Planning: The CD's should be included in local county and city land use planning. They have a proven track record of communicating effectively and constructively with private landowners. As we mentioned above, the key to success on the ground is voluntary compliance. This is what the CD's specialize in doing. CTED could help by identifying the CD's as an important resource and as stakeholders in their own right in the land use planning process.

Jim and I look forward to discussing these issues with you. We hope to help your office forge a visionary but practical policy for sustainable farming and forestry in Washington State.

Sincerely yours,

Lynn Bahrych, J.D., Ph. D.

Jim Peters, Chair, Squaxin Island Tribe

cc: Mark Clark, Executive Director, WSCC  
Lynn Brown, Chair, WSCC  
Keith Phillips, Executive Policy Director, Office of the Governor